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THE
ROBERT WINTHROP CHANLER
EXHIBITION

Introduction and Catalogue

By

Christian Brinton



Mar. 21 - Apr. 21 (see American art news, v. 20, no. 24)

1922





MURAL PANEL
The Colony Club



THE GIRAFFES
Salon d' Automne, 1905



ROBERT WINTHROP CHANLER

78192 By Christian Brinton

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They will keep away from thee all evil and will harbour all virtue. They will counsel and console thee when other help has failed. Receive a woman only behind the red screen, and a man behind the blue one. If thy heart grows heavy and thoughts cease to come, use the purple screen with silver stars and golden herbs, and thou wilt fall asleep and wake refreshed.

Reaching back to the mystic symbolism of the Egyptians and the enigmatic fantasy of the East, and looking forward to a new psychology of decoration, the achievement of Robert Winthrop Chanler is unique in the annals of American art. Chanler's career represents a series of reactions against conventions social and aesthetic. This descendant of an imposing sequence of colonial governors, generals, jurists, and clergymen has succeeded in affirming his individuality despite every obstacle. Surmounting in turn the inherited handicaps of family tradition and material affluence, he has won his way to a virile autonomy of thought and action which is to-day his most cherished possession. Whatever the merits of his professional effort, it will always be to his credit that Chanler, as a personality, has

stoutly resisted that process of standardization which renders so many of us mere pitiful examples of quantity production.

The successive steps by which Robert Winthrop Chanler has attained to his present position are as picturesque as they are significant. A boyhood passed in almost feudal seclusion at Rokeby, the family estate in Duchess County, was followed by a score of years spent in Europe, loafing, studying, and painting in various Continental capitals, with special emphasis upon Rome and Paris. It was the young man's original intention to become a sculptor, and with this end in view he began his apprenticeship in Rome under Mariano Benlliure. A brief course of training in the atelier of Falguière in Paris was, however, followed by his renouncing clay for crayon and colour. The ensuing four years were divided between Juliens, the Académie Carlorossi, and the tutelage of that arch academician, Jean-Léon Gérôme.

It was the day of studio realism, of painstaking copying of old masters, and the painting of conventional nudes in the approved professorial north light. Such names as Manet, and even the serene, idyllic Puvis were anathema to those in authority, and it is scant wonder that the fresh, untrammelled fancy of the young man from overseas should have rebelled against the pedantic formalism then in vogue. Disgusted with the sterile instruction of atelier and academy, Chanler forthwith proceeded to Italy, where he revelled in the fluent decorative harmonies of Pinturicchio in the Borgia apartments of the Vatican, the memorable frescoes by Benozzo Gozzoli in the Palazzo Riccardi, Florence, and kindred triumphs of Renaissance taste and invention. For the first time in his life were Chanler's creative sensibilities genuinely aroused. Convinced that he had started on the wrong pathway, he returned to Paris in order to begin his artistic career afresh. At the outset, he took a studio in the rue Campagne-Première, later establishing himself in the rue Dumont-d'Urville, near the Place de l'Etoile, where he set to work with the ardour of a true proselyte. He was not handicapped by timidity. The result of his initial effort was the Peacock Room, a suite of four shimmering red and gold panels, the central motif being his favourite bird with proudly distended tail. The

work was completed in 1900, and to-day finds place in the master's room of the East Nineteenth Street residence—that veritable House of Fantasy which suggests the palace of Tsar Berendey, the Musée Wiertz, or the Huerta del Sordo, where Goya used to live and labour in fruitful seclusion.

On his return to America in the autumn of 1902, Chanler did two characteristic things. He executed a series of mural panels for the residences of Mr. Lloyd Warren and Mrs. W. K. Vanderbilt, and he went in for politics. For his first interior decorations he retains a certain affection, but for politics he acquired an abiding distaste. The only office which at all interested him was that of Sheriff of Dutchess County, to which he was later elected. He is still in fact genially known as "Sheriff Bob" by his former constituents, to most of whom his artistic adventures have remained an insoluble enigma. Back to Paris in 1905, when he painted the celebrated Giraffes, which were first seen at the Salon d'Automne, Chanler returned to America the following season. And it is in his native country that he has since resided, and where the creative, as contrasted with the purely acquisitive, phase of his existence has been passed.

Despite, or possibly because of his lusty individualism, Chanler absorbed not a little during his sojourn abroad. He ruthlessly brushed aside everything that did not contribute to his personal development. The avowed enemy of crude, unrelieved realism, he acquired above all an instinct for style, for the decorative as opposed to the imitative function of line, colour, and form. The hard-won conquests of the impressionists and kindred science-smitten experimentalists counted for nothing in his eyes. He reacted only to that which was creative and imaginative, yet definitely organized within certain given limitations. Temperamentally, he harked back to the production of the artist-craftsmen of more naïve and spontaneous days.

Studying the Early Gothic tapestries in the Musée Cluny, standing before the Duke of Devonshire's gallant woven panorama depicting The Hunt, in the Victoria and Albert Museum, or strolling through the Amalienburg in the Nymphenburger Schlossgarten, so delightfully embellished by the Frenchman, de Cuvillié, Chanler little by little discovered his true

artistic terrain. These were the formative moments of his career, yet the crowning experience of all was when the young American chanced upon a wondrous Chinese screen in a little shop in the Place St-Georges. He had found at last his *pays de rêve*, the richly lacquered surface awakening countless aesthetic atavisms, and suggesting fascinating possibilities for future development.

In his studio in the Broadway Arcade, and later in the Windsor Arcade, before he moved to the House of Fantasy, Chanler entered upon the task of diverting himself with brushes and paint, and incidentally of contributing his quota to the sum of decorative art in America. His first important undertaking was an ambitious panel entitled *The Hudson-Fulton Fête*. He here endeavoured to treat current motifs compositely and synthetically, as did the masters of the Renaissance and the craftsmen of the past, who never lost contact with actuality no matter how abstract the spirit of their production might be. It was in this panel, which in a moment of self-deprecation he impetuously destroyed, that Chanler found himself. His humouristic fantasy, his inventive vitality, and his unfailing sense of stylisation were all present in this work which, alas, like his precious K'ang Hsi screen, has vanished from view, leaving behind only its magic power of suggestion.

Yet it is from this particular period that dates the creative phase of Chanler's career. Despite its inequalities, there was something in the *Hudson-Fulton* panel which he discovered he could do, must do again, and do better than before. And, too, no longer possessing his treasured Coromandel, he set about painting for his own delectation a series of screens, each of which might partially compensate for the one he had lost. It was in fact mainly from personal motives that Chanler became a professional artist, and personality is the element he most prizes alike in art and in life.

Once settled in the House of Fantasy, where he has resided during the past decade, Chanler gave proof of his astounding capacity for decorative expression. The den executed for Mr. Joseph B. Thomas, the floreate murals for the Colony Club, the panels for Mrs. Harry Payne Whitney's studio and for her Wheatley Hills residence, and his work in the houses of

Mr. James Deering, Mrs. Walter Lewisohn, and W. R. Coe, Esquire, afford eloquent witness of Chanler's industry, and his amazing diversity of inspiration. Meanwhile, he has also designed curtains, hangings, stained glass windows, wall panels, and particularly screens, for the screen he holds in special favour. Chanler is no feeble neurasthenic. He labours with superb zest and enthusiasm. There is in his make-up not a little of the fecund creative exuberance of the Renaissance.

Familiar with the technical practice of all ages and epochs, and employing with facility various media of expression, Robert Winthrop Chanler has placed to his credit work which for spirited freedom of invention, rich colour quality, and sheer beauty of surface finds no parallel in America. His effects are equally happy whether on canvas, velvet, silk, wood, plaster, or paper. He uses either flat or modelled surfaces, and his metallic underlays, overlays, and "risings" in gold, silver, or aluminum are the work of a born craftsman. Chanler's art suggests more than all else a series of decorative fantasias each of which is a complete and independent improvisation. Not satisfied with that which ordinarily meets the eye, he reaches toward the far magic of the sky, or dives into the shining depths of the sea, bringing forth fresh treasure-troves of form and colour. Strange beasts and fabulous birds appear at his beck and call. And one after another these gleaming aquatic monsters and gorgeous avian marvels float or fly to the surface of his creative consciousness and assume their appointed places in a given composition. It is all immensely stimulating, and typically Chanleresque.

And what is the significance aesthetic and psychological of this amazing output, now deliberately *en période*, now diversified with luxuriant individualism. The art of Robert Winthrop Chanler is eclectic. The man's sympathies range at will over the world of form, colour, and design, with special stress upon the legacy of the Orient, and the Renaissance. Anti-academical, and always frankly decorative, that which he above all seeks in these fluent murals and varitoned screens is style, a definite, specific style—that personal impress which must ever remain the touchstone of creative aspiration. Although he disclaims any leaning toward modernism as such, the art of Robert Winthrop Chanler is nevertheless modern in its psychology.

It is modern above all in its emphasis upon line rather than upon mass. Mass is static, line is kinetic, and Chanler's expression is nothing if not kinetic. Shooting through more or less formal compositional schemes, cutting across structural divisions, and springing aloft in joyous, triumphant *élan* is the Chanler line, the line that makes for rhythm, the syntropic line which so effectively heightens the appeal of this work.

Technical terminology cannot, however, adequately indicate the spirit of Chanler's art, a spirit that lies deep-rooted in the man's emotional content. Apart from the customary Anglo-Saxon heritage which the average American shares, there are certain more picturesque elements that must be reckoned with. An extended sojourn in the Southwest familiarized Chanler with the sure decorative instinct of the Indian, while from the negro derives a racial rhythm, a species of subconscious syncopation, which is frequently in evidence. And beneath all a touch of mystic fatalism, of dark diabolism, haunts these variegated masses of foliage wherein lurk sinuous serpent and gaping crocodile. The fear-motive of the primitive man in fact is as prominent in certain of these compositions as is the impulse toward frenetic dance movement. This art is symbolic as well as synthetic. Neither classicist nor servile academician, neither realist nor impressionist, one may best characterize Chanler as a post-romanticist.

Silhouetted against the drab, factual background of everyday existence, Robert Winthrop Chanler presents a striking figure both as man and artist. Throughout the half-century of his existence he has resolutely defied discipline. He stands solidly against that craven, sinister conspiracy of contemporary society which tends to defeat the salutary variety of nature. At once full of refined sensibility and Rabelaisian ribaldry, sardonic, or jovial and gargantuan of temper, Chanler typifies the ascendancy of the individual over soulless formalism, the right of sovereign man to be free, and to follow the dictates of his tastes and appetites. Securely entrenched in the House of Fantasy, surrounded by books, exotic pets, and a few choice friends and familiars, he joyously abandons himself to creative expression. He feels no further need to travel, either here or abroad. For he can truly say with another great romanticist—*L'univers est ma patrie.*



CATALOGUE

- 1 PEACOCKS. Wall Panel, 1900
- 2 THE GIRAFFES. Decorative Panel, 1905
First exhibited, Salon d'Automne, 1905
- 3 PORCUPINES. Screen, 1911
Owned by Lady Cunard
- 4 DEATH OF THE WHITE HART. Screen, 1911
Owned by Mrs. Payne Whitney
- 5 AUTOBIOGRAPHY. Screen, 1912
Owned by Mr. Henry Clews, Junior
- 6 THE BUFFALO HUNT. Screen, 1912
Owned by Mrs. Frederick Y. Dalziel
- 7 FLAMINGOES. Screen, 1913
- 8 BIRDS OF PARADISE. Screen, 1913
Owned by Mrs. E. H. Harriman
- 9 SWANS. Screen, 1913
Owned by George F. Porter, Esquire
- 10 HOPI INDIAN SNAKE DANCE. Screen, 1913
- 11 THE JUNGLE. Panel, 1913
Owned by Mrs. William Astor Chanler
- 12 THE DANCE OF DEATH. Mural Panel, 1914

- 13 CURTAINS. Black and Gold, 1914
- 14 THE HUNT. Screen, 1914
- 15 PORCUPINES. Screen, 1915
Owned by Mrs. John Jay Chapman
- 16 THE GULF STREAM. Screen, 1915
- 17 DEER SCREEN, 1915
Owned by Sidney Harris, Esquire
- 18 ASTROLOGICAL SCREEN, 1917
Owned by Mrs. Harry Payne Whitney. Reverse, First Version, Salon, 1912
- 19 INDIAN DEER HUNT. Screen, 1918
- 20 JAPANESE WARRIORS. Screen, 1918
Exhibited First International Art Exhibition, Dallas, 1919
- 21 HOGARTH SCREEN, 1918
- 22 MILLE FLEURS SCREEN, 1919
Owned by Mrs. Charles Cary Rumsey
- 23 COQ D'OR SCREEN, 1919
Owned by Mrs. Willard B. Force
- 24 BIRDS OF PARADISE. Panel, 1919
- 25 BEFORE THE WIND. Screen, 1919
Owned by Mrs. John Jay Chapman
- 26 CHINESE FANTASY I. Panel, 1919
- 27 CHINESE FANTASY II. Panel, 1919
- 28 CHINESE FANTASY III. Panel, 1919
- 29 DEEP SEA FANTASY. Screen, 1920
- 30 NATURE IKON I. Panel, 1920
- 31 NATURE IKON II. Panel, 1920
- 32 NATURE IKON III. Panel, 1920
- 33 BLUE VASE SCREEN, 1921
- 34 ORIENTAL LANDSCAPE SCREEN, 1921

- 35 THE DEMON. Panel, 1921
- 36 AVIAN ARABESQUE. Screen, 1921
Owned by Mrs. John Sanford
- 37 SIRENS. Screen, 1921
Owned by Mrs. Harold Barclay
- 38 SYLVAN IDYL. Screen, 1921
- 39 BEAVERS AND PORCUPINE. Screen, 1922
- 40 AVIAN FANTASY. Screen, 1922
- 41 VIZCAYAN BAY. Screen, 1922
Owned by James Deering, Esquire
- 42 STUDY FOR MURAL DECORATION, 1922
Executed for Mrs. J. Winslow Bixby, Junior

SCREEN PROJECTS

- 43 PIERROT SCREEN, 1922
- 44 THE ISLES OF GREECE. Screen, 1922
- 45 ACROBATS. Screen, 1922
- 46 THE MERMAIDS. Screen, 1922
- 47 FRIENDLY FELINES. Screen, 1922
- 48 FLORAL MOTIF. Screen, 1922
- 49 THE HAPPY HUNTING GROUND. Screen, 1922
- 50 INTERMEZZO. Screen, 1922
- 51 FABULOUS BIRD. Screen, 1922
- 52 OCTOPUS. Screen, 1922
- 53 FIRE BIRDS. Screen, 1922
-
- 54 DECORATED MELODION, 1922
Owned by Mrs. John Jay Chapman



AUTOBIOGRAPHY
Owned by Mr. Henry Clews, Junior



PORCUPINES
Owned by Lady Cunard



INTERIOR DECORATIONS
The Colony Club



MURAL PANELS
Residence of Mrs. Walter Lewisohn



ASTROLOGICAL SCREEN
Owned by Mrs. Harry Payne Whitney



MURAL DECORATION

Owned by Mrs. J. Winslow Bixby, Junior



BOUDOIR

Residence of William R. Coe, Esquire, Oyster Bay



BEDROOM

Residence of Mrs. Harry Payne Whitney, Wheatley Hills



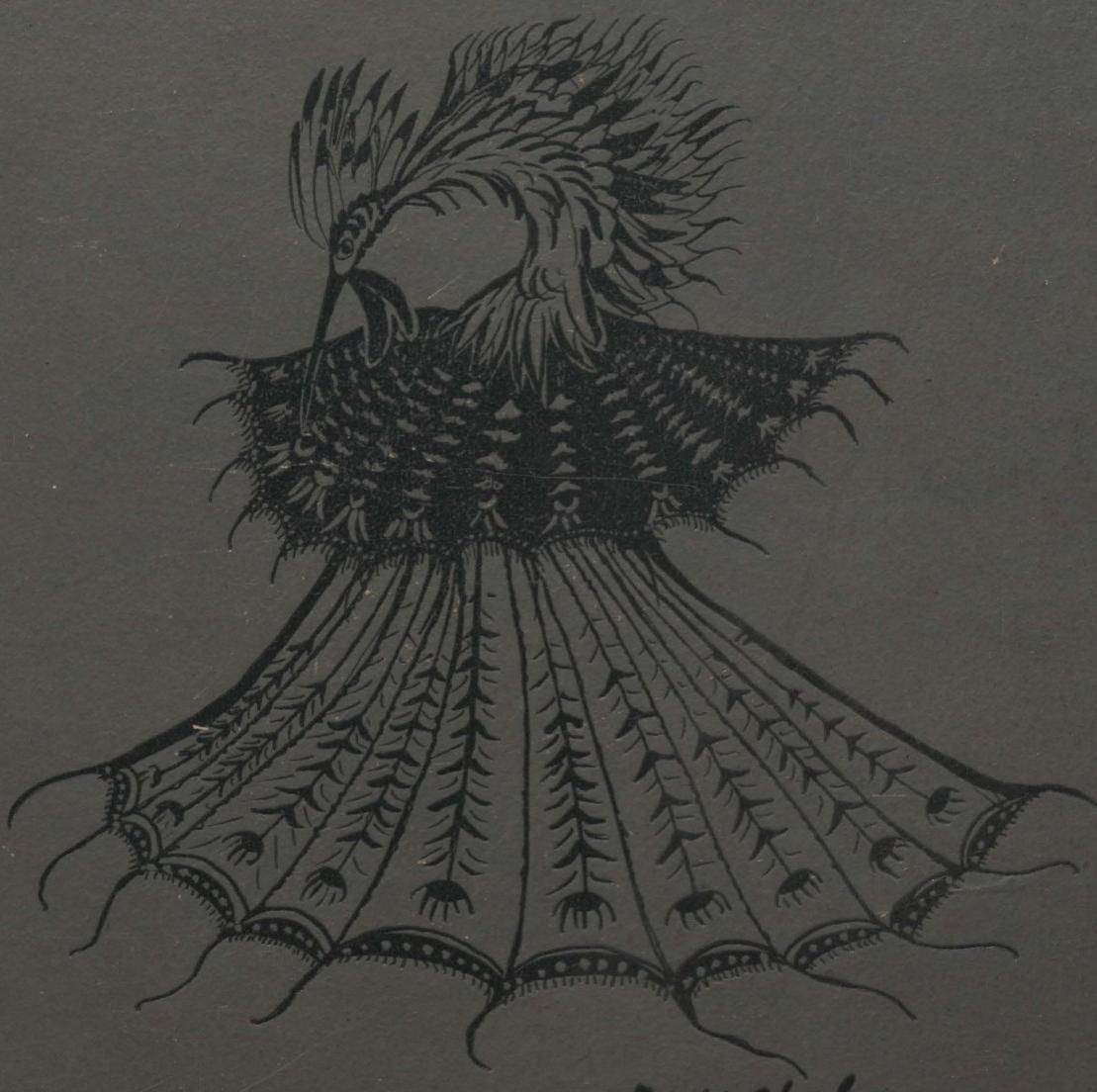
AVIAN ARABESQUE
Owned by Mrs. John Sanford



VIZCAYAN BAY
Owned by James Deering, Esquire



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Robert W. Chanley